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Gender Roles within American Marriage: Are They Really Changing?

by Lucy A. Hawke

(Adult Fast Track Sociology 2220 & English 1102)

My mother was an elementary school teacher and my father a self-employed businessman. Within marriage, my parents modeled contemporary gender roles. As marriage partners who both worked careers, they hired a day care provider for my sister and me. While in middle school, I learned that society defined marriage gender roles as one where the husband worked outside the home and, two, where the mother stayed in the home, caring for the household duties and children. My experiences shaped my views and allowed me to see and understand marriage gender roles in a different light while understanding there is not only one type of marriage in American Society. The influence of feminist thinking within American Society has resulted in both positive and negative impacts that affect people's attitudes toward traditional gender roles within the marriage.

Traditional Gender Roles

Historically, marriage in American society has had clearly defined gender roles. These traditional roles arrived with the immigrants who settled the New World. Along with these gender roles, the European settlers brought the farm economy that perpetuated these roles. The husband has traditionally held the role of the breadwinner; the wife lived the role of caregiver. In a book by Elaine Leeder, *The Family in Global Perspective: A Gendered Journey,* she wrote that recorded history reflects the phases of the family through the economy. Three main phases of American economy, how family lived and made money to support the family, have influenced the gender roles of family.

Economic Influences upon Marriage Gender Roles

As America settled, a family rural-based economy developed family units of a husband and a wife supported by their own farming efforts. The American economy was such that even the cities supported farm life. This life style had the stronger men working in the fields and the physically less strong women working in the home caring for the home and the children. The husband and the wife would often have several children who would then help work on the farm to support the family, acting as a team working together toward the common goal. The husband would occasionally go to town to gather the supplies needed in production on the farm, plow and plant the fields, take care of the animals in the barn, and harvest the crops. In the cities, the male and female roles in the family reflected the gender roles of the farms due to the co-dependent relationship of the farm and city economies (Leeder, 2004, p. 72-73). In the family rural-based economy, family was focused on survival; where the husband and wife worked together as a team.

As our economy changed to a family-wage economy so did the gender roles within the family. The roles of father and mother were more segregated within the home. Men traveled and worked outside of the home and women were restricted to the home to provide childcare and attend to household duties. With goods for the home produced outside of the family, the family became primarily a place that provided emotional support and refuge for its members (Leeder, 2004, p. 73-75).

The rise of the family-consumer economy brought even more segregation within the marriage. The husband's role in marriage was to go out into the world: to work as breadwinner, to be the achiever, to go to war, and to risk pain and death. The wife devoted the majority of her time to caring for the home and for the children. The wife was the care provider who made the clothes, taught the children, nursed the family, and biologically produced the children (Leeder, 2004, p. 75). William H. Lockhart support this viewpoint in his study completed in 2002 when he wrote "In most current works from this perspective, this authoritarian perspective is balanced by a strong stress on loving and serving one's family. The ideal society would be full of strong traditional intact families with the fathers being full-time breadwinners, the wives maintaining order in the households, and the children happily submissive" (Lockhart, 2002, p. 78). The excessive restrictions of gender roles were defined by the economic and political society of the day. Early changes in the American economy strengthened the traditional gender roles in marriage.

The Birth of Feminism

Around the middle of the 19th century, the changing attitudes toward slavery also saw changing attitudes to women's rights. A young woman, Elizabeth Cady Staton, was working with her husband to support the abolitionist movement in the United States. While on their honeymoon, Elizabeth and her husband had traveled to London to participate in the World Anti-Slavery Convention. This conference was hosted by Englishman, Joseph Sturge, an abolitionist who invited others committed to freeing the world's slaves to attend. While at the conference, the American women delegates were not allowed to speak to the general audience because they were women. Among the delegates was Lucretia Mott who became a friend of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. While conversing with each other, the kernel of the idea of freedom and equality for women was born. At the convention, Elizabeth's own experience with her societal inequality with men was highlighted.

A few years after Elizabeth's return from London, she was instrumental in helping host a conference in Seneca Falls, NY. This conference in upstate New York was called to address the issue of equality for all people including both slaves and women. According to most historians, the birth of the American Women's Suffrage Movement was this conference in 1848. The founding members of this movement took the name "Suffrage" because the view they held was that women were suffering under the dominance of men in their lives. This movement focused on writing legislation to support and allow women to vote in political elections and hold public office, helping women receive education and work in a chosen career outside of the home, and having women treated fairly and with respect within and without the home. In 1920, the 19th amendment to the Constitution of the United States was ratified which granted women the right to vote (Treckel, P., 1995).

Influence of Feminism upon Society

The American Women's Suffrage Movement focused on the abstract philosophy of equal treatment for women and the legal measures to achieve this goal. From this beginning the Movement evolved over time into the current day Feminist Movement from which developed Feminist theory. Feminist theory is a well defined set of terms, suppositions, and philosophies that provide women more gender equality in family and society in economic, social, cultural, and educational fields.

As a result of the Suffrage Movement, gains in equality for women were made in the 1920s and 1930s. During World War II, women's roles were drastically changed due to the need to support the economy of the war effort. When many men went to war creating a shortage of labor in the factories, these jobs were filled by the women. Responding to the nation's demand for labor, women's labor strengthened our nation and indelibly changed their role in society. When the war

was over, both men and women were expected to return to their traditional pre-war roles in society. This expectation was reflected by television shows like "Leave It to Beaver" and "Father Knows Best" in the 1950s. Women were not satisfied returning to their roles as dominated by traditional thinking.

Rise of Feminist Theory

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a social rebellion against the constraints of tradition and against the traditional images of gender roles. Since the 1970s, the feminist movement has grown, and now there are many different perspectives on feminism, just as there are different denominations of religions. For instance, one could ask a person who practices Judaism if he or she is Orthodox, Conservative, or Reformed. Likewise, feminism today has taken on a variety of different aspects. One could be a Liberal, Radical, Marxist, Cultural, and/or Multicultural feminist. Over time world political movements and events have influenced feminist thoughts and definitions. In the book written by James M. White and David M. Klein entitled *Family Theories: Understanding Families* White and Klein included definitions of some of the variations of feminist theory.

Liberal feminism is focused upon the goal of "Achieving gender equality. Barriers to gender equality are viewed as any law, institution, or person that discriminates based on gender. Thus, most of the efforts of liberal feminism have been directed at equality of opportunity and the removal of barriers that would work against such equality" (White, Klein, 2002, p. 185). For example, within Liberal Feminism, the roles in a marriage would have both the husband and wife sharing household tasks and caring for children while both also managed their careers.

Radical Marxist Feminism, as defined by Shulamith Firestone (1970) (cited in White, Klein, 2002), "is the thought that biologically men and women were created different and are not equally privileged" (White, Klein, 2002, p. 187). This results in a social class based on sex that "underlies other social divisions by economic class or race [resulting in a] male patriarchy as well as female socialization in the family" (White, Klein, 2002, p.187). "The outcome of this theory has encouraged the social partitioning of labor so as to justify not only social inequality by inequality of opportunity" (White, Klein, 2002, 186-187).

Cultural Feminism, as defined by Linda Alcoff (1995), "is the ideology of a female nature of female essence reappropriated by feminists themselves in an effort to revalidate undervalued female attributes. For cultural feminists, the enemy is not merely a social system or economic institution or a set of backward beliefs but masculinity itself and in some cases male biology" (White, Klein, 2002, p. 188).

Multicultural Feminism "raises issues such as the exploitation of immigrant women from underdeveloped countries who labor as nannies and caregivers for dual career families in North America" (White, Klein, 2002, p. 189). Other issues raised include the diversity of family types and structures, the relinquishment of personal freedoms and cultural and religious practices (White, Klein, 2002, p. 189). These issues challenge the "serious issue of feminist ideology versus respect and tolerance for religious and cultural diversity" (White, Klein, 2002, p. 189).

A Study on Feminist Attitudes

In a study completed by Catherine I. Bolzendahl and Daniel J. Meyers, they found the gender equality attitudes in male and female respondents have been changing in the last 30 years. Conclusions were based upon two approaches in the data they studied, primarily from the General Social Survey (GSS), 1972 – 1998. "The GSS is a nationally representative survey of noninstitutionalized [*sic.*] adults in the U.S. using a cross-sectional design" (Bolzendahl & Meyers, 2004, p. 769). The two approaches studied were interest-based and exposure-based. Through these

two approaches, Bolzendahl and Meyers were able to determine that there are several predictors of feminist attitude. These predictors are employment, income, family structure, age, and education. Employment included whether or not a married woman's or a married man's spouse worked outside of the home, how the proportion of income combined with hours worked, and if the status of the spouse's work influenced respondent's attitudes. Also included were the family structure and how the respondent's background and socialization influenced his or her feminist beliefs. Considered also were the respondent's ages, his or her complete level of education, his or her mother's completed education level, and how these factors influenced his or her beliefs. They also looked at variables of race, location, region and urban environment, religion and religious participation, and political identification for the respondent's beliefs.

In almost all of the areas Bolzendahl & Meyers concluded, "a smaller proportion of income earned by men only predicated feminism in the family responsibilities domain. [Bolzendahl & Meyers] interpreted this finding to mean that men with higher relative income [than the woman's] expected women to take more responsibility for house-hold management" (781). The findings of this study tied attitudes of the respondents directly to how much money each of the partners made and brought into the marriage economy.

Positive and Negative Effects of Feminism

Feminism has influenced how people define gender roles within a marriage. A husband's role within a marriage has expanded making it possible for a man to care for his children while they are young. Today, a husband can have the opportunity to get to know and love for his children; before the feminist movement, that opportunity would have been rare, if even possible. Feminism influenced the husband's role within the family; for it is now acceptable to be an. "At-Home Dad."

Likewise, it is now acceptable for the wife of the family to work outside the home in a career. The challenge that arises for both husband and the wife in his or her family role is to balance the demands of family and career. Feminist theory has given the family units options for distribution of work within marriage that were unavailable in the past. This flexibility allows freedom for the husband and wife partners in economic and marriage growth. It also allows husbands and wives to make the best decisions for their family today and does not confine their options to traditional, yet outmoded roles.

Overall, the influence of feminism upon marriage and family roles has had both positive and negative effects. The negative effects have been that some argue that full equality will never be achieved due to the inherent differences between men and women. There will always be people who fight against change and want to keep things the way they have always been. Positive effects have been that women are being treated with more equality in society and business. However, there is still a long way to go. Women have the opportunity to influence local and national politics and policy by exercising their right to vote. This affects not only women, but their children and families as well. Women can: hold public office, pursue their education, pursue their careers, and overall provide opportunities for more personal fulfillment making a positive difference in the lives of others. Men are not treating women as property and can celebrate their contributions to society.

The effects of feminism are varied; sometimes the influence of feminism upon gender roles within a marriage works and sometimes it does not. Some people can adapt to the new thought patterns and help give new meaning to the roles of the husband and wife and how these roles work in a marriage. Others are not able to or do not want to change with the times. However, the changes that feminism has brought to our society in the United States have been positive.

In the past, clear gender roles for husband and wife had been understood within the context of the marriage. Today there are fewer clearly defined models for contemporary marriage gender roles and how these roles ought to be lived out. It must be admitted that in some cases, a lack of

clear gender roles weakens the marriage. However, when a husband and a wife have the freedom to bring to a marriage his or her whole self, and not just live a traditional gender role, the American marriage has been strengthened by feminist theory. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton asserted over 100 year ago, "There is one kind of marriage that has not been tried and that is a contract made by equal parties to lead an equal life, with equal restraints and privileges on either side. Thus far we have had man marriage and nothing more" (Treckel, p. 1995). Change is not easy, but change is happening. My hope is that through education, more people will see the benefits offered to contemporary marriage by these changes.

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